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**Anti-virus for the crime plague:
Is an anti-crime movement taking root in contemporary South Africa?**

By Marlene Roefs*

Anti-crime organisations in South Africa have crossed the barriers of geography and race, imitating the waves of crime that have breached the fading boundaries around 'African urban areas' and that are now confronting contemporary South African society at large. Various shapes of 'popular justice' organs, enjoying support among citizens of all colours of the nation, have mushroomed in reaction to what is seen as a rampant, ruthless and ever-growing industry. To what extent is the public willing to mobilise or be mobilised to protest collectively around crime-related issues? Is a mass anti-crime movement developing?

While crime statistics and victimisation studies are widely available - offering useful though unreliable indicators of crime levels in South Africa (see, for example, the SAPS crime statistics, *Nedcor • ISS Crime Index*, 1998) - behavioural intentions toward crime are rarely reported. The aim of this article is to contribute to the study of the public's reaction to crime. In particular, the focus is placed on the willingness of the public to participate collectively in anti-crime protest action and to involve themselves in anti-crime organisations.

Anti-crime organisations in South Africa

During the struggle against apartheid, Black urban communities suffering from poverty and violence, gave birth to self-defence units that acted as community police forces. 'Community courts' were used to enforce law. Since state policing was focused on the oppression of black South Africans rather than on ensuring an acceptable social order for all South Africans at the time, 'organising people's power' was seen as a legitimate cause (Nina 1996). In the early stages of the period of transition to democracy, however, 'self-regulation' was implemented, aimed at redressing tensions between the sovereignty of the state and civil society organs (Nina 1996). Recently, the tensions between the courts, the police, and the government, on the one hand, and the public, on the other, seem to have increased again. People's courts, self-defence units, disciplinary committees and street committees of the past have returned, hidden behind new guises.

As in most countries going through a fundamental political transition, "South Africa's transition to democracy has been characterised by a sharp increase in crime" (Haelele, 1998:1). Tensions are created as the state and the public lambaste each other. The state accuses the public of a lack of respect for authority, unco-operative behaviour, and taking the law into its own hands. The public sees the justice apparatus as incapable of securing safety for the citizenry. Communities blame the police service and courts for inefficiency, racism, corruption and unresponsiveness. It is widely believed that the government does not give enough priority to crime.

The question occupying many minds is whether the feelings of frustration, antagonism and violation that crime has evoked in the public are strong enough to cause the public to resort to measures other than the criminal justice system in order to guarantee a protected and safe environment. Is crime creating a pool of 'gatvol' (sick and tired) people willing to join in collective endeavours to fight crime?

The line between law-abiding anti-crime organisations and vigilante organisations that 'take the law into their hands' is thin. The most radical public anti-crime organisations are labelled vigilante organisations. The most well-known anti-crime organisation, Pagad (People Against Gangsterism and Drugs), based in the Western Cape with tentacles in KwaZulu-Natal and other provinces, is one of those community organisations that makes it difficult to distinguish between criminals and victims. Anti-crime committees or forums elicit a less negative connotation. Neighbourhood watches patrol through demarcated areas. Explicit names are used for specific sectors of society combating crime. Women are mobilised in, for instance, Women Against Violence (WAV), and business in Business Against Crime (BAC). Receiving less attention, though certainly operative, are farmers who also organise radical collective actions aimed at protecting their livestock, and residents in more well-to-do areas who cannot (solely) rely on private security firms.

The following paragraphs are closely related to this question, namely whether people are willing to stage protest action against the state and criminals and whether such protest potential will be utilised in anti-crime organisations. Developments in people's willingness to protest against crime-related issues will be described using national survey data of representative samples of the South African population over the age of seventeen, gathered on an annual basis between March 1995 and March 1999. The second part of the analysis focuses on involvement in anti-crime organisations during the past two years, followed by a consideration of the link between involvement in anti-crime organisations and protest intention. This may provide information about the extent to which protest potential has been organised. Within the limits of the survey data at hand, an attempt will be made to shed some light on the relevance of certain demographic characteristics of people who are willing to fight actively against crime.

Intention to protest over crime-related issues

Respondents were asked: "Can you think of a few issues over which you would probably participate in protest actions in the future?" The answers given to the open question were clustered into several main issues. Protest issues relating to crime covered answers like 'gangsterism', 'drugs', 'rape' and 'abuse', though most respondents identified 'crime/safety'. The answers suggest that, between the inception and the disbandment of the first ANC Cabinet, protest over crime has become much more likely. At the same time, the results show that this may not be a linear trend. On a national level, respondents' intention to join in protest against crime increased most strongly between 1997 and 1998, reaching its zenith in 1998.

Between 1995 and 1996 protest intention went slightly down (from 8.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent), after which the willingness to protest went up by 5.3 per cent between 1996 and 1997 (12.8 per cent). This trend continued in the next year with a 13.3 per cent increase between 1997 and 1998 (26.1 per cent). The following year this figure became somewhat lower with just over one-fifth (21.4 per cent) of respondents' willing to protest.

Important differences were found between the nine provinces. As shown in Figure 1, the intention to protest over crime-related issues significantly differed among the provinces, as well as over time. Most noteworthy are the immense increases witnessed between 1997 and 1998 in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape and the Free State, with more than a quarter of the respondents indicating that they would probably protest against crime (53.6 per cent, 32.0 per cent, 30.7 per cent and 26.8 per cent, respectively). In 1999, respondents from Gauteng, the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal were still most likely to protest though less so than in 1998. Free State residents, on the other hand, did not seem to have changed their minds, with their willingness to protest registering second only to Gauteng (27.4 per cent and 39.5 per cent, respectively).

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Interestingly, these figures only partially overlap actual crime statistics. For instance, in his analysis of reported crimes during 1998, Liebenberg (1999) shows that Durban (murder and theft), Johannesburg (robbery), Queenstown/Umtata (various crimes) and the Boland (rape and assault) rate as the highest risk crime areas. Only in Johannesburg and Durban do the statistics for crime and people's willingness to protest crime match. The Western Cape does not belong to the high-risk category, yet its residents seem willing to protest against crime.

Perhaps a deeper search in crime statistics might shed some light on the congruence between the incidence of certain types of crime and perceptions of crime. A plausible link may be that robbery, burglary, theft, hijackings and forms of stealing are more strongly linked to perceptions of crime than personal violence, for instance, rape or assault. This may be because victims of assault and rape often partially blame themselves, whereas burglary, for example, is clearly a less personal form of victimisation against which the police should protect citizens. Thieves are not after a person or his/her body, but after money and other material belongings. They are seen as belonging to the outside social world, whereas in most cases, rapists are often people from the victim's own neighbourhood, someone the victim knows personally. Secondly, the number of crimes reported - one source of information about the incidence of crime - vary for the different types of victimisation. Reporting theft is more likely than reporting rape, for instance. Reporting rape and assault is mostly not easy for victims. Many times they feel ashamed, indoctrinated by their attackers and disrespected by police officials who lack the proper training to provide assistance to victims. Reporting robbery or other forms of theft is much less difficult. Moreover, the purpose of reporting personal violence serves another goal than that of theft. The former is mostly motivated by the need for protection and assistance in the process of recovery, while the latter is merely a formality for insurance purposes. Personal violence has ruined people's lives for many years - in all likelihood the numbers of reported rape and assault are far less than actual occurrences of these crimes. Organised crime and various forms of theft have undoubtedly increased during the past years, spreading to every corner of society. It also receives ample attention in the media and public discourse, creating particular perceptions in the minds of the public, in contrast to those about personal violence. Further research is clearly necessary to develop a better understanding of the impact of various forms of victimisation and the way in which this affects popular perceptions of crime and reactions toward this evil. In all likelihood, such studies will also provide more insight into the need of people to join anti-crime organisations.

Support for anti-crime organisations

In March 1998 and 1999, in response to the question, "Are you a sympathiser, or a member who regularly attends meetings, or are you an office bearer of an anti-crime group, or none of these?", more than a third of respondents said they sympathised or were actively involved in an anti-crime organisation. The proportion of those actively involved in anti-crime organisations generally dropped from 9.6 per cent to 7 per cent. Sympathy, however, significantly increased from 24 per cent to 32 per cent. A breakdown by province (see Figure 2) suggests that anti-crime organisations received the highest support in KwaZulu-Natal in 1998, whereas high support was registered in the Free State, Eastern Cape and Gauteng in 1999. In these provinces, the increase from 1998 was also the most significant. An impressive 16 per cent of Eastern Cape residents said they were actively involved or office bearers of an anti-crime organisation. In the Free State and Gauteng, however, anti-crime organisations had less active members, but many sympathisers. The only province in which a significant decrease in involvement was found, was the Northern Cape that, together with Mpumalanga and the Northern Province, showed the lowest levels of involvement in 1999.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

In order to assess the importance of provincial versus other demographic characteristics for people with protest intention and organisational involvement, the relative importance of provincial, racial, class, age and gender differences was considered. The study found that gender and age were the least relevant. Provincial differences best characterise the varying levels of protest intention and involvement in anti-crime organisations. The results suggest that it is only within the provinces where race and class matter, even though the relevance of class versus race varies per province. In the 'mixed' provinces, race generally better distinguishes between potential protesters and involved people than class, whereas class seems more important in the more homogeneous provinces.

Involvement in anti-crime organisations and anti-crime protest

Involvement in anti-crime organisations does not seem to have changed significantly in the past two years, while protest over crime-related issues tend to become somewhat less likely. How are the two related? Do people who are supportive of anti-crime organisations want to join in collective protest action against crime more than people who do not sympathise with or are not actively involved in an anti-crime organisation? Statistical analyses revealed that the link between involvement and protest is very weak. However, remarkable differences were found between the provinces. For instance, respondents from the Western Cape and Gauteng were more likely to mention crime as an issue to protest against if they were supportive of an anti-crime organisation. In 1999, people in KwaZulu-Natal also tend to link involvement to protest, though less strongly than respondents in the Western Cape and Gauteng. In the other provinces, a relation between anti-crime involvement and anti-crime protest intention was not found. A strong link between involvement and protest intention would have indicated that people who are involved particularly consider participating in collective protest, which may imply a mobilising function of anti-crime organisations (Gamson and Schmidler 1983; Meyer and Tarrow 1998).

Interestingly, sympathy with and activism in anti-crime organisations also did not seem to inhibit anti-crime protest. The study did not find a negative relation between involvement and protest intention in any of the provinces. This finding suggests that there is (as yet) no demobilisation effect of organisational involvement. Some

academics argue that the organisation of collective sentiments and interest into a body that protects the collective's interest might lead to demobilisation of potential protest (Piven and Cloward, 1979; also Pretorius (1996) and Shubane and Shaw (1993) on corporatism in South Africa). In the same vein, it could be argued that the demobilisation of the protest of potential crime fighters might result from the institutionalisation and regulation of the anti-crime movement.

A cautionary note must be made, however, since findings obscure the possibility that some anti-crime organisations do have a mobilising and radicalising effect on people, while some have not. The study did take into account some demographic and geographic characteristics of respondents, while other important factors like victimisation, and the presence and support for an actual anti-crime organisation in a certain area at a certain point in time were omitted from the analysis. All in all, a simplistic generalisation of the effect of involvement in anti-crime organisations on protest over crime certainly does not confirm the idea that anti-crime organisations act as vehicles for collective protest actions that target the crime virus.

Concluding remarks

The data presented above suggests that an anti-crime movement has developed. One out of five respondents said he or she will protest against crime-related problems. A third of the population support anti-crime organisations. A much smaller though significant proportion are actually active in such organisations.

The link between involvement in anti-crime organisations and the intention to protest against crime is less clear than one may think. In most of the provinces, involved and uninvolved people would protest. In another study of the (de)mobilisation effect of involvement in political organisations, civics and trade unions during the transition period in South Africa (Roefs and Klandermans, in press), it was found that organisational involvement did not negatively affect people's intentions to protest and that it did not de-radicalise them. However, the effect of involvement in organisations on the number and type of protest issues raised by respondents seems to be more strongly linked to the incorporation of social problems in policy formulation than to involvement in certain types of organisations; the more incorporated the issues, the less likely people seem to protest. Since policy that deals with crime on a local level strongly differs from area to area, it will be difficult to study the effect of involvement in anti-crime organisations on a national level. Larger studies of involvement and policy-making on a local level are necessary for a better understanding of the consequences of involvement in anti-crime organisations on the ways in which crime will be dealt with. This article has tried to shed some light on this link on a provincial level.

Geographic borders are more useful in distinguishing between the potential crime fighters and the passive public than are racial or class boundaries. However, racial and class disparities are still more important than, for instance, age or gender-related dynamics, with race and class still very strongly related in South Africa. Depending on the type of statistical analyses, one of these two demographic factors may turn out to be the most apt descriptive tool. In this analysis, class differences seem to have gained importance, while racial differences are becoming less demarcated. Ironically, one of the most horrible phenomena in South Africa is becoming one of the scarce equalising factors in this divided country.

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- 1 Antoinette Louw remarks that crime statistics "are usually regarded with caution. In South Africa they are treated with outright scepticism" (1998:11). Generally, it is believed that South African crime data is unreliable, suffering from underreporting, especially regarding rape and common assault.
- 2 Private security is a fast growing industry in South Africa.
- 3 Unfortunately, involvement in anti-crime organisations has only been included since the 1998 survey.
- 4 It falls beyond the scope of this article fully to explain why some are more or less willing to protest over crime in terms of socio-psychological dynamics that are related to experiences with and perceptions of crime. Crime statistics show that the incidence and types of criminal offences significantly vary between geographic areas (see Liebenberg for a useful analysis and overview of 1998 HSRC-GIS crime statistics), class and race groups, as well as over time.
- 5 A comparison of crime-related protest issues with work/job-related issues revealed that, in 1998, the intention to protest over crime was as high as over jobs. In 1999, 29 per cent of respondents would protest over jobs.
- 6 This proportion is higher than the number of respondents who sympathised with trade unions or who were involved in unions, which was below 30 per cent in 1999.
- 7 The means presented in Figure 2 reflect the mean score on the answering categories (none =1, sympathiser =2, active member =3, office bearer =4). They provide an indication of degree of involvement.
- 8 Pearson's correlation coefficient of $r=.12$ in 1998 and $r=.16$ in 1999.
- 9 Respectively, $r=.30$ and $r=.17$ in 1998, and respectively, $r=.34$ and $r=.21$ in 1999.
- 10 Pearson's correlation coefficient $r=.13$
- 11 Unfortunately, another big equaliser might be the spread of HIV infections – particularly among the most economically active and the youth - with disastrous consequences for the South African economy.